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EASTER ISLAND[1]

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[With 4 plates]

A treeless volcanic rock, scarcely 13 miles long and 7 miles wide, slowly being eaten away by the waves and lost in the great emptiness of the Pacific Ocean—2,000 miles off the coast of Chile and 1,500 miles from the nearest Polynesian archipelago—this is Easter Island, the most isolated spot ever inhabited by man. Today it supports a mere handful of natives, mostly half-castes, and many of them lepers. These 450 people, now under Chilean rule, are the only descendants of the men who created there one of the most original civilizations that have left a trace behind. Yet they have all but forgotten their past.

For two centuries, the name of the island has been almost synonymous with mystery. In the world of ethnologists it occupies a place much like that of isles of fancy in children's imaginations.

The sense of mystery which still surrounds this lonely rock was first aroused on Easter Sunday, 1722, when the Dutch Admiral Roggeveen, in command of three frigates cruising about the Pacific in search of the fabulous Davis Land, saw the dome-shaped peaks of its volcanoes jutting above the horizon. From the decks of their ships his sailors, as they drew nearer, could discern all along the cliffs of this unknown shore an army of gigantic statues, which completely overshadowed a small band of naked and noisy savages on the beach below. The visit of the Dutch discoverers did not last long, but they carried back to Europe the strange tale of a solitary, desolate island guarded by colossal stone images, far too heavy and impressive to have been carved and erected by the few primitive people they found living there.

Later in the eighteenth century, and afterward, Easter Island was visited in succession by several other great navigators: Cook, La Pérouse, Kotzebue, Beechey. They, too, saw with amazement the stone monsters, measured them, and even sketched them. To their

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minds also, the contrast between the monuments, indicative of a flourishing and skillful population, and the desolation they found about them was a peculiar enigma. They spoke of cataclysms, of volcanic eruptions, that might have changed the course of the island's history, but these were pure guesses based on superficial observation.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, a different group of visitors appeared. These were the whalers, most of them enterprising New Englanders in pursuit of business and adventure in the South Seas. A few echoes of their experiences come to us in indirect ways. Thus we know that the captain of one of these ships kidnapped several men who afterward escaped and tried to swim back to their island although they were 3 days out. It is not surprising that relations between the whalers and the natives were far from cordial. Too often the ships' officers resorted to impressing the islanders into their service. Such incidents explain the hostility shown to some European navigators between 1820 and 1830 when they attempted to land. But these brief visits of Yankee sailors were not without benefit to the study of Easter Island. Thanks to their collecting instinct, numerous precious specimens of its early art have been well preserved in the Peabody Museum at Cambridge and the Peabody Museum at Salem. In Cambridge, besides various wood and stone carvings, there are two images brought from the island, made of bark stuffed with bulrushes, which represent a branch of its artistic tradition otherwise entirely unknown. They are covered with painted designs that reproduce, with fine and precise workmanship, the elaborate patterns used in tattooing up to a hundred years ago. In this respect the old Easter Islanders rivaled the achievements of the Marquesans.

In 1859 a frightful disaster befell the islanders when Peruvian blackbirders attacked the island and kidnapped the king, a large number of the nobles and priests, and many hundred commoners, all of whom were carried off to the guano islands of Peru to work as slaves. Most of the people died within a short time. When at last the few survivors were repatriated by a French ship, they spread among the remaining islanders the smallpox and tuberculosis contracted in Peru. Thus within a few years most of the native population and with them the vital links with the past were wantonly destroyed.

The mystery of Easter Island became still deeper when, in 1864, the first Christian missionaries (members of the French Order of the Sacred Heart) arrived and tried to obtain from the natives details about the origin of the statues, and the methods that had been used to transport them—since many of them had obviously been moved from the place where the stone was quarried. Their answers to questions of this kind were unilluminating and showed that they had only a vague tradition of what had happened before their time. Their ignorance, combined with the state of primitive poverty into which they

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had fallen, again emphasized their enigmatic relation to the lost civilization, of which the statues and great stone mausoleums as well as other finely wrought remains of the past were mute evidence.

Then scientists began to study Easter Island. At what time and by what manner of men, they asked, were these images made, with their colossal bulk, their empty eyes and scornful expressions? Was the island the remnant of a sunken continent? Had it been inhabited by a powerful earlier race which had died out, or been destroyed and displaced by more warlike conquerors? Had eruptions of the volcanoes exterminated the skilled craftsmen, the sculptors, and the architects, leaving only a small group of people too discouraged and weak to continue the work of their forefathers? These are among the questions that still puzzle students.

The statues symbolize the mystery of the island and have made it famous. Yet their paradoxical presence on this speck of land in the midst of the Pacific is perhaps less difficult to understand than are the wooden tablets covered with small incised designs that were collected from the natives in the second half of the last century. The tablets raised the fascinating question whether their makers used on them a kind of hieroglyphic script which might some day be deciphered and would unveil the secret of its past. But all attempts to decipher them, with the help of intelligent natives, failed.

A few years ago the study of the tablets took an unexpected turn. A Hungarian linguist, Guillaume de Hevesy, published a long list of Easter Island hieroglyphs which, it was claimed, presented very striking analogies with the symbols of a newly discovered script found in the ruins of a civilization, 5,000 years old, in the Indus Valley at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. There, coetaneous with the Sumerian civilization, flourished large and opulent cities inhabited by people whose name and affiliations are totally unknown to us. They were wiped out probably at the time of the Aryan, and their existence remained unsuspected until the great excavations of Sir John Marshall. The Mohenjo-daro people have left a great many inscriptions on seals which have so far resisted any attempt at decipherment. If it could be shown that the two scripts were related, new light might be thrown on the obscure past of the whole Pacific area.

The problem thus posed was of such significance for an understanding of the early history of man that the French Government in association with the Belgian Government decided to organize an expedition to Easter Island to try to read its riddle. The leader of the expedition was a French archeologist, Charles Watelin, who, unfortunately, died in Tierra del Fuego. I was then asked to carry on the research, in association with the Belgian archeologist, Dr. Henry Lavachery.

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000 We saw Easter Island for the first time on a rainy day in winter. It was also my first sight of a Polynesian island. I did not expect, of course, to find the classic coconut palms and hibiscus, for I knew that the island was without trees or shrubs, but I certainly had not imagined that this outpost of the sunny islands in the South Seas would remind me, as it did at once, of the coasts of Sweden and Norway. When the cruiser on which we had made the voyage anchored off Hangaroa, the only modern village on the island, memories of Scandinavia came even more vividly into my mind as I examined through my field glasses the frame houses of the natives, which are of a type common in northern Europe. The capital of the legendary Easter Island looked, for all the world, like a humble fishermen's hamlet seen in a fog on the Baltic.

609 I shall never forget that first day when we were anchored just off the little harbor. Gusts of wind drove long rollers against the shore with such force that they broke amid spouts of spray with a deep pounding. In front of the sandy cove, the waves piled up over a bar that, it seemed, nobody could cross. The natives gathered on the [203] beach did not appear very eager to meet us, but the *karanga*, the cries which announce any important event, had sounded in the village, and from everywhere, on all the paths leading to the sea, we could see men on horseback coming at full speed. Near the boathouses a palaver was held, and on the outcome of that everything depended. The commander of the cruiser had decided that on no condition would he put us and our 90 boxes of equipment ashore. Our only hope for an immediate and safe landing lay with the natives.

609 Suddenly we saw them rush to the boathouses, drag three canoes toward the sea, jump into them and disappear in the surf. We held 502 our breath, expecting the canoes to capsize in their attempt to cross the bar. But after a short time, one, two, then all three surged up from the wall of water and headed toward our ship. The men were received with cheers, a well-deserved tribute to their courage and skill.

291 When the canoes reached our ship we saw that they were full of natives wearing the most surprising disguises. The majority were 177 dressed in old uniforms of the Chilean navy. In one canoe there were, it appeared, lieutenants, admirals, surgeons, and engineers. A few had also put on feather headdresses, similar to those in which their ancestors had received Captain Cook, but they wore them merely [439] as an advertisement of the native wares of all kinds which they wished to trade for shirts and sailors' caps.

144 Each time I find myself using the word "natives" for the modern inhabitants of Easter Island, I have a hesitant feeling, just as hesitant as on that day when I first saw their faces over the railing. I

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could not decide whether these men were a heterogeneous crowd of European beachcombers or real Polynesians, the sons of the sea rovers who had colonized the island. That European blood flowed in their veins, there was no doubt. Some of the men who came aboard and tried to sell their curios looked decidedly French; others might almost have had brothers or cousins in Hamburg or in London. Yet there was something exotic in all of them and traces of old Polynesian descent could be seen in their black, wavy hair, in the strange, vivacious dark eyes, in the high foreheads. These first Easter Islanders whom I met impressed me as of mixed race. Later, genealogical investigations showed that only a third of the present inhabitants could claim descent from a pure Polynesian ancestry—and the claims were not always well attested.

There is one misconception about these people which should be dispelled. It has been stated over and over again that the modern Easter Islanders are a degenerate population and that they can have nothing in common with the people who carved the statues and inscribed the tablets. This is not true. They appeared to me in many ways to be highly gifted.

During the 6 months I spent on the island, I found myself compelled to admire their ingenuity and their remarkable talent for assimilation. No European village has given me the impression of more intelligent adaptation to a changing world. This capacity is doubtless responsible, in part, for the passing of the old culture. Though the most isolated people in the world, the Easter Islanders are constantly on the lookout for new ideas, new fashions—and also new vices. Their extraordinary faculty for exploiting any weakness or interest in their visitors has had some amusing results. For example, a few years after the missionaries came to the island, the natives started to speculate on the antiquities and on the mysterious past of their little country. Finding that foreigners were interested in the small wooden images of emaciated figures which had been one of their forefathers' greatest artistic achievements, they proceeded to produce crude imitations by the hundreds. The modern craftsmen are without illusion as to the perfection of their work, but they excuse themselves by saying: "Why should we bother about beauty and finish when our patrons don't discriminate between good and bad images and we get in exchange the soap and clothes we want?" Thanks to this commercial instinct, several of their old industries have been kept alive.

One of their greatest and most profitable activities is palming off on amateur archeologists rough stones alleged to be ancient artifacts or well-made imitations of them. The very day of my landing a native cynically proposed to cooperate with me in faking old imple-

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ments and works of art. His idea was that since I had books and photographs showing the designs and he had the manual skill we might form an ideal, not to say a profitable, partnership. I must confess that on several occasions the islanders' skillful imitations completely deceived me, and I thus acquired a beautiful collection of ancient stone hooks that I only gradually realized were modern copies.

This continued practice of the traditional arts has a certain historical bearing. It suggests that there has never been a complete breach in Easter Island civilization and that the present natives, however mixed in blood they may be, are, nevertheless, the successors in direct line of the unknown men who carved the old wooden images that are nowadays prized specimens in our museums.

Unfortunately, this is not the only old custom which has survived. From the time when the Dutch discovered the island to the present, its people have had the reputation of being the cleverest thieves in the South Seas, and quite rightly. This complaint is repeated in all the accounts of the early navigators, and many of the dramatic incidents on the beach of Hangaroa have arisen from the natives' brazen contempt for the sanctity of private property. Only the sensitive and elegant French explorer La Pérouse adopted the policy of laughing at such pilfering, and paid no further attention to it. He and his men were amused by the attitude of the native women who helped their mates pick pockets by distracting the attention of innocent victims through entreaties and "ludicrous gestures."

The natives of our day are just as thievish as their forefathers, and this wayward disposition is the cause of endless troubles for the English company which has leased the island from the Chilean Government for sheep raising. To prevent constant stealing of the sheep the company put barbed wire across the island in an attempt to force the people to remain within the bounds of their village. But such drastic measures were of little avail, and in the year I spent there 3,000 sheep disappeared. Though the culprits are known to the whole community, family loyalty protects them and makes investigation useless.

Otherwise the natives are law-abiding and peaceful; there are very few records of murder or bloody violence among them. The only criminal we heard of was one of our guides, who, ironically enough, proved to be about the only honest man on the island.

The people live as they did in the past, on the produce of their fields. Taros, sweetpotatoes, yams, bananas, and sugarcane grow abundantly on the fertile volcanic soil. The only wants they cannot supply themselves are for manufactured goods such as soap. And they like especially to get foreign clothing. In this matter, the men

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do well for themselves by barter with the white sailors who visit the island, but the women cannot be so provided for. They complain bitterly of the difficulty they have in satisfying their coquettish taste.

For an anthropologist, the material on Easter Island is rather scant. The old culture has nearly gone. No Westerner ever saw it while it was still functioning. The data on the past, which can be gathered, are limited to statements or tales which a few people have heard from fathers or grandfathers. Nevertheless, I was surprised to find a relatively rich folklore, which helped me to understand many aspects of the ancient civilization. Both legends and anecdotes stress cannibalism, which seems to have haunted the imagination of the Easter Islanders before the arrival of Christianity.

Those who expect to find in these traditions any evidence for the existence of a civilization previous to that of the Polynesians will be sadly disappointed. There is not a single feature of the Easter Island lore that does not point toward Polynesian origin. The language itself is pure Polynesian, and no words now in use hint of a legacy from any other linguistic stock.

These are the main facts to bear in mind as we turn to the problem posed by the mysterious gigantic statues and the inscribed tablets. But before we go into it, we must first consider what is to be said of the theory that the island is a peak of a sunken continent, since upon this assumption the classic interpretation of its mysteries has for a long time rested. There is no scientific evidence that Easter Island is the wreckage of such a sunken continent—Lemuria or Atlantis. It is plainly a typical volcanic island of recent origin, formed by a series of eruptions originating on the floor of the ocean. Soundings have revealed a depth of 1,770 fathoms 20 miles from its coast. Moreover, when the island was settled by Polynesian migrants it does not seem to have been much more extensive than it is now. Its coasts are subjected to continual erosion from the waves, and it is true that during the last decades a few of the monuments which once stood on the top of a high cliff have been precipitated into the sea. But since the ancient sanctuaries were erected along the shore, if the erosion had been very great, all of them would have been washed away by now. There has also been a question about a great road which, it is said, ran to the shore of the island and continued under water, suggesting that the shore was once much farther out. The famous French writer, Pierre Loti, was, if I am not mistaken, the first to mention this "triumphal avenue," which he thought would lead to the heart of the mystery. On a simple statement of this traveling poet visions of submerged glory have been based, and many good minds have allowed their imaginations to follow the submarine road down to enchanted palaces. The truth is that no such road exists. What Loti took for

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a paved highway is seen on close examination to be only a bed of lava that in its flow reached the sea.

Other writers, abandoning the hypothesis of the sunken continent, have advanced the view that Easter Island is the center of an archipelago which vanished beneath the waves in a great cataclysm not so many centuries ago. They suggest further that the inhabitants of this supposed string of islands had used Easter Island as a burial place for their dead. According to this surmise, the dream Land of Davis would have been among the many islands that were submerged. But no geological facts can be found to support this theory either. We know, too, that the sanctuaries of Easter Island continued to be used as burial places by the islanders as recently as 70 years ago. Ruins of old villages near the monuments are added evidence that this speck of land was inhabited by the living in former times as it is today, and that it could not have been merely a mausoleum.

However, there remains the baffling fact that such a diminutive island is covered with great statues, some of them 30 or 40 feet high and weighing many tons. Despite my skepticism about the elaborate theories offered in explanation of this miraculous flowering of sculpture, I must confess that I, too, like all previous travelers to the island, was overwhelmed by a feeling of astonishment and awe when I first saw them.

There are few spectacles in the world more impressive than the sight of the statue quarry on the slopes of Ranoraraku. The place is indeed sinister. Imagine a half-crumbled volcano, a black shore line, and huge cliffs which rise up from the sea with smooth green pastures above them. Guarding the quarry, near the volcano, is an army of giant stone figures scattered in the most picturesque disorder. Most of them still stand out boldly. Successive landslides have partially covered others, so that only their heads emerge from the ground, like those of a cursed race buried alive in quicksand. Behind the rows of the erect statues, along the slopes of the volcano, there are 150 figures still in the process of being born. Wherever one looks in the quarry, one sees half-finished sculpture. Ledges of the mountain have been given human shape. Caves have been opened in which statues rest like those on medieval sepulchers in the crypt of some great cathedral. Hardly a single surface has been left uncarved by the artists in their frenzy to exploit the soft tufa of the mountain.

There is something weird in the sight of this deserted workshop with the dead giants all about. At every step, one stumbles over discarded stone hammers. It is as if the quarry had been abandoned on the eve of some holiday, and the workers were expecting on the day after to return and resume their tasks; indeed, in several cases, only a few more blows would have been needed to cut the statues finally free from the rock of the slope.

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In my opinion, the seemingly sudden interruption of work in the quarry is the most puzzling problem presented by Easter Island. Such an abrupt stoppage in the sculptors' activity suggests some unforeseen catastrophe, some extraordinary event which upset the entire life of the place. The natives have always had the idea that magic was at the bottom of the trouble whatever it was. There is a legend among them that an old sorceress, forgotten perhaps at a feast, may in her rage have put a curse on the quarry which frightened the workers forever away.

If we reject this fabulous story, we have no explanation of the phenomenon for which there is any basis however slight. Was there possibly some surprise attack by a hostile group on the island in which all the skilled stone carvers were killed? Was there an attack from chance invaders? Were the natives suddenly overwhelmed by a violent epidemic, or did something about their first contact with white men cause them to lay down their tools once for all? We do not know the answer, and I doubt if we shall ever have any light on it.

Whatever the truth about the end of their work, it appears that the last of the stone carvers were under the spell of a megalomaniac dream. Some of the unfinished statues are of enormous size, one of them 60 feet tall. Others are to be found in places out of which it seems impossible that they could ever have been taken. Perhaps their sculptors never intended to move these isolated giants.

There are two types of Easter Island statues—those which still stand in the crater or at the foot of the volcano Ranoraraku, and those which once surmounted the *ahu* or burial places. Though they are of the same stone and of the same general style, there are differences which are worth stressing.

A word must be said about the burial places, which were situated at frequent intervals all along the shore in a line that encircled the island. Most of them were huge stone structures of a peculiar plan developed from the primitive cairn. In these large mausoleums, the crude heap of stones has evolved into a real monument through the use of a retaining wall. This wall, which formed a façade always facing seaward, was built of slabs or regular blocks of stone carefully fitted together into beautiful, smooth surfaces. Behind this is a level platform, and then a gradual slope backward, filled in with coarse rubble. The central portion of the façade juts out, like the apron of a stage, and on the top of this projecting part of the platform stood a row of statues with their faces turned inland. In the long slope leading up to this sacred place the dead were buried.

The figures of the mausoleums or sanctuaries were in the nature of huge busts, the head being disproportionately large in relation to what appears of the body. The back of the head goes straight up from the shoulders and, with the vertical lines of the ears, gives the head a

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172 flattened appearance. The eyebrows are well marked and overlap the
532 elliptical cavities which represent the sockets of the eyes. The nose is
764 long, the tip slightly upturned and the nostrils expanded. The thin lips are pursed with what seems a scornful expression. The arms, slightly flexed, cling to the bust with the hands joined over the abdomen, below which the figure is cut off.

172 The other sculptures on the island—the lonely images on the plain
532 and those that guard the slope of the volcano Ranoraraku—have the same features except that there are no sockets for the eyes. This part of the face, as in some modernistic sculpture, is defined only by the ridge of the eyebrows and by the flat plane of the cheeks below. The lower part of these statues tapers to an enormous peg, which was sunk into the soil.

171 The function of the *ahu* images can be surmised from analogies with
532 the rest of Polynesia. The old Marquesans, close relatives and perhaps
778 forebears of the Easter Islanders, adorned their stone platforms with statues which represented their ancestors. Among all the natives of central and marginal Polynesia, there is the same tendency to give human form to ancestral gods presiding over the sacred places. In the sanctuaries of central Polynesia stood huge slabs that were erected in the same position as the Easter Island statues. These slabs were receptacles for the souls of the ancestral gods, who entered them when they were called by the priests. The Easter Island statues are merely a more realistic development of this idea, favored by the existence of easily carved tufa deposits. Their sculptors elaborated rather than originated a tradition.

172 Everywhere on the island statues are to be found: on top of volcanic
532 hills, along cliffs, and in places which seem almost inaccessible. Their mass must have made their transportation difficult. As a matter of fact, no one has yet explained how some of them were hauled from the quarry and then erected on the platforms on the opposite side of the island.

483 Of course, there are many other instances of people with rudimentary equipment moving objects of great size—for instance, the dolmens and menhirs of Europe. As the statues that the Easter Islanders
[532] erected on their sanctuaries were of the native tufa, they were not exceedingly heavy for their bulk. Their weight ranges from 5 to 8 tons; only one weighs as much as 20 tons. But because the rock from which they were carved is soft, it must have been necessary to take innumerable precautions not to mar or break them in transit. This would have been easy if abundant supplies of wood had been accessible, but, except for a few bushes, the island seems always to have lacked wood. Good material for making ropes was apparently also lacking. The only thing they could have been made from is paper

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mulberry, which the natives grew in special stone-enclosed plots. Perhaps the wood necessary for making sledges on which the statues might have been hauled was lumber that floated ashore. This is frequently mentioned in ancient tales. If native timber or driftwood was available in the old days, the difficulties of transportation would not have been overwhelming. We know that other Polynesians transported objects quite as heavy as the Easter Island images. For instance in the Marquesas, slabs weighing as much as 10 tons were hauled along the slopes of the mountains. The famous doorway, or trilithon, of Tonga, which is one of the marvels of the world, has a lintel weighing 30 tons. But when the Easter Islanders of today are asked about the means by which the statues were transported, they only say: "King Tuu-ko-ihu, the great magician, used to move them with the words of his mouth."

Other questions have arisen about the Easter Island carvings. How, for instance, did the people get the manpower for such large enterprises, which would have been impossible, it seems, if the population were as small as it is today? The answer is that before the Europeans arrived, the island had ten times as many inhabitants as it now has—4 or 5 thousand would be a conservative estimate. We know this from data given by its first European visitors and the early missionaries.

Again, are these statues as old as has been said? Certain writers have dated them as far back as 1000 B. C. There are even some who think that they might have been in existence 10,000 years ago. But the weight of general evidence is against these views. Although their material is a relatively soft stone, they still retain sharp outlines, and the hammer marks are still noticeable on them. As the winds blow with relentless force over the island, and rains are both frequent and violent, if the carving had been done thousands of years ago, it could not be in such good condition as it is today. Tradition seems to indicate that the Polynesian ancestors of the present inhabitants came to the island and settled it in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries A. D. All things considered, I do not think the statues can be more than five or six centuries old. But no definite date can be set for them.

The figures of stone that stood so high above the shores of Easter Island, and in such striking formation that it is no wonder they amazed the old navigators, have attracted more attention than the other mysterious objects to which I have already referred—the wooden tablets with rows of strange signs incised on them. But these curious pieces of wood have also given rise to much speculation. They were bought from the natives by the missionaries in the early days of their work, and ever since they have been thought to contain a real script which, if it could be read, would prove a key to the island's mysteries.

The first white man to discover the tablets was Monseigneur Jaussen, French Bishop of Tahiti, in 1866. As he was looking at a piece of

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212 114 wood, wrapped around with strands of hair, which a missionary had brought from Easter Island as a gift from the natives to the head of their new church, he was puzzled by the rows of small designs he noticed on it. These he took to be hieroglyphs, and his view has been shared by all the later students of the problem. The so-called "hieroglyphs," cut in the wood with a shark's tooth, are realistic or conventionalized drawings of various subjects, including apparently geometrical figures. Many of them represent men, animals, plants, and other familiar forms reduced to their essential features with no unnecessary detail to blur the image. They run up and down the tablets in rows so arranged that when the reader arrives at the bottom of one row, he has to turn the tablet upside down to see the designs of the next one in a normal position. These images, or characters, are among the masterpieces of primitive graphic art that have come down to us. They are outlined with an exquisite grace. The symbols are uniform in style suggesting an established and highly developed aesthetic tradition.

212 532

Unfortunately, the discovery of this remarkable work was not followed up by scientific inquiries at a time when they might have borne fruit. When, finally, in 1914 Mrs. Katherine Routledge, the distinguished English anthropologist, tried to obtain a key to its meaning from the last native who had been trained in the old chanters' school, it was already too late. He died of leprosy a few days after his first interview with her. The modern natives know nothing of the matter. They tell merely vague tales of the tablets, saying that they are magical objects which have the power to cause death.

212 114

The supposed substance of the rows of designs on some of the tablets was dictated in the Easter Island dialect to Jaussen by a native named Metoro. But when Metoro's words were translated it appeared that they were only a simple description of the designs, not their actual content, as had been hoped.

Other attempts at interpretation have been undertaken but with even less success. The most serious was that of an American naval officer, W. J. Thomson. In 1886 he tried to obtain the text of what was inscribed on the tablets from an elderly native. This man undoubtedly had some knowledge of the characters, but he had become a good Christian and was afraid of jeopardizing his chances in another world by touching the tablets or even looking at their pagan symbols. In order to resist the temptation, he ran away and hid in a cave, where Thomson finally captured him. There he was "stimulated" by flattery and a few drinks to what was thought to be a revelation of these secrets of the past. At any rate, he began to chant old Polynesian hymns, which he said were the texts of the tablets. Thomson and his colleagues noticed, however, that their informant was paying no atten-

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tion to the rows of designs as he chanted and did not repeat his words when the same tablet was put into his hands a second time. He was, therefore, thought to be a fraud and was dismissed. 212 114

As I have already said, a definite clue to the enigma of this so-called "script" seemed at last to have been discovered 7 years ago, when Mr. de Hevesy pointed out a series of analogies between some of these Easter Island designs and those of an old Asiatic script found on stone and clay seals in the ruins of two forgotten cities, Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, in the valley of the Indus. Now, archeologists agree in thinking that the civilization of the Indus region dates from about 3000 B. C. Its people were an unknown race that knew how to build planned cities with a complicated sewerage system. The script they used is still undeciphered, but hypotheses about it have been advanced which, if substantiated, would make it one of the earliest known forms of man's writing. Some Orientalists see striking analogies between this Mohenjo-daro script and the early Chinese hieroglyphs.

Although the relationship between Easter Island "script" and that of the Indus has been accepted widely as a demonstrated fact, I cannot help being skeptical for several reasons. The Indus civilization, contemporaneous with that of Sumeria and Egypt, was extinct by 2000 B. C. Easter Island culture died out only 80 years ago. Roughly 15,000 miles of land and sea separate the Indus Valley from the island. Between them lie India, Indonesia, and enormous wastes of water. In other respects Mohenjo-daro and Easter Island have nothing in common: the arts of the Indus, like weaving, pottery, and metal working, were unknown to the remote islanders. The proud city dwellers of Mohenjo-daro would have looked down upon the half-naked people who lived in thatched huts, and indulged in cannibalism. How could two such different and widely separated peoples have shared the same form of writing?

In order to answer this question, Mr. de Hevesy advanced the theory that the Easter Island tablets are many centuries, if not millenniums, old and were brought to Easter Island by the first immigrants. Here the evidence that remains is against him. The wood of the best and largest Easter Island tablet is that of a European oar. Besides, if Hevesy's theory were to be accepted we should have to make the difficult assumption that the Easter Islanders kept their script unchanged for more than 5,000 years. A careful analysis of the tablets and the Indus script has not borne out this theory. True, some of the signs in the Indus script have striking analogies with those of Easter Island. I am, nevertheless, still more impressed by the divergencies, and by the doubtfulness of parallels based only on a few cases which take no account of many variants of the same design.

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212 114 Moreover, there is little question, I believe, that the designs on the tablets were created by natives of Easter Island. It would be difficult to explain on any other assumption the presence among them of so many figures of animals belonging to the local fauna and of objects that are found, as far as is known, in its culture only. Mr. de Hevesy interpreted certain of the Easter Island symbols as representations of monkeys and elephants, but for these suggestions of India's jungle life he drew on his imagination.

212 In the hope of throwing some light on the mystery, I applied to several tablets an analytical method. I counted their symbols and studied their combinations to find out whether they might constitute an actual script. If the symbols represented sounds, the same signs would have been combined in the same order whenever a word was repeated. But this seldom happens. The same combinations of the same symbols recur in only a very few cases. The individual designs are repeated over and over again but apparently in haphazard order. No clue to a script came from this study.

If we might assume that the tablets contain an actual script, the question would arise whether it were pictographic or ideographic. To answer this there are not enough different symbols. Most of them are variants of about a hundred fundamental designs. On certain tablets the same signs form a high percentage of the total.

Assuming that the Easter Island tablets contained a script, I thought it likely for a long time that this was based on the same principle as the designs inscribed on birchbark by the Ojibway Indians, who record charms by means of figures which sometimes remind us of the Easter Island symbols. From the images drawn on bark, the Indian shaman reads a text which, to his mind, they represent. The Cuna Indians of Panama still use the same primitive form of writing.

But one thing made me suspicious of such an interpretation. The Easter Island tablets are pieces of wood of various odd shapes which are always covered with designs from one end to the other and on both sides. If their contents corresponded to a script text, this would mean that the artist always knew in advance just the size and shape of the piece of wood his chant would fill. As this seemed highly improbable, I was obliged to abandon this entire hypothesis and seek for some better clue to the mystery.

212 533 I found it in a link that has been kept between the tablets and the oral traditions, songs, and prayers of the Easter Islanders. The very word that the natives use for the tablets puts us on the right track. They are called *kohau rongorongo*, which means literally "orator staff"—that is, the stick, sometimes decorated with carved symbols, sometimes not—which a speaker holds in his hands while making a public address or reciting a piece of traditional lore, as if to give added significance to his words. The *rongorongo* were professional chanters

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who formed a society, which existed not only on Easter Island but also on other Polynesian islands. In childhood they were taught in special schools to memorize and to recite the lore of their tribe. 212 533

Everywhere in Polynesia the chanters use such an "orator staff." Sometimes, as in New Zealand, the staffs are provided with notches, which are supposed to help in reciting genealogical tables. In the Marquesas, the chanters held, while chanting, a bundle made of string wound about with knotted ends hanging down, which was thought of as containing the substance of the chant though the connection between the words and the contents of the bundle was loose. The bundles symbolized the chants and were in consequence of paramount importance. They were solemnly given to the young people after they had been initiated into the lore of their ancestors. 212 533 171

These facts, I concluded, give us the best clue in the problem of the Easter Island tablets. To its chanters as to the chanters of other islands, the "orator staffs" were the accessories and the symbols of their function. Originally, the designs on the staffs or tablets might have been mnemonic, but later on they lost their exact significance in the minds of the natives and were looked upon merely as simple ornaments or magic symbols. It may be added that even now we can observe on Easter Island a slight relation that has been preserved between design and chant. The natives are in the habit of chanting when they make string figures or cat's cradles. This interpretation of the tablets may not contain the whole truth about them. I offer it rather as the hypothesis which best fits the facts available today, and which harmonizes also with what we know of an underlying tendency in Polynesian civilization. 212 533

But these are not all the questions that have been raised by Easter Island. Some observers have found in the well-carved and well-fitted stones of its sanctuaries likenesses and relations to the ancient remains in Peru, and to account for them have said that there must have been intercourse between these two parts of the world at some period of history. But close study has revealed that between the Peruvian and the island ruins the resemblances do not go beyond the general fact of an exact fitting of the stones. The plan and the structure of the Peruvian buildings are entirely different. In Peru the walls are all of carved stone blocks, whereas in Easter Island they consist of slabs set on edge outside with rubble behind. The only conspicuous architectural achievement of the Easter Islanders was to select the slabs and to dress their corners so that no gap would appear on the surface and impair the general appearance. This they could naturally have learned to do without crossing the Pacific in frail canoes and making the long journey inland to the site of the wonderful ruins in Peru. Moreover, these are certainly far older than the Easter Island sanctuaries. Thus it seems clear that we must 172 114 [342 333]

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172 give up hope that the remains on Easter Island will help to solve
114 the problems of early American civilizations.

174 The result of 3 years' work on the island culture pursued at the
173 Bishop Museum in Honolulu, with which I have been associated, shows that this Ultima Thule was discovered and settled by Polynesians, who arrived in a fleet of double canoes sometime, roughly, between the middle of the twelfth century A. D. and the end of the thirteenth. The time of the discovery and settlement can be established approximately from the lists of chiefs that have come to us. These the early missionaries took down from the dictation of the natives. I was permitted to copy another one from a list which my native informant had compiled himself. Many errors have, of course, slipped into these records, but a comparative study of them shows that Easter Island has been ruled by about 25 or 30 chiefs since the founder of the dynasty, Hotu-matua, and his people first came to its shores. Allowing 25 years for each ruler's reign—the usual method of measuring time in Polynesian annals—we find that this must have happened very close to the twelfth or thirteenth century. From other sources, we know also that this was a period of great sea expeditions, and that the settling of New Zealand and of many other islands in the Pacific occurred in what seems to have been a heroic age of ancient Polynesia.

173 Curiously enough, the oral tradition of the migration to Easter Island has been preserved remarkably well even down to the present. While I was there, I was told in great detail many more or less legendary incidents of the voyage eastward of Hotu-matua and his associate, the noble Tuuko-ihu. These stories with their core of history were the glorious sagas of the first emigrants to this little lost world.

174 At about the same time, the Tahitians, Maori, and Marquesans had a culture which was still undefined but was very similar in the different groups. In the course of the succeeding centuries, over each of these island areas a civilization developed along original lines, though still retaining the common background. The Easter Island culture belongs to this purely Polynesian type. The ancestors of the present population merely improved upon the legacy they received.

Where then did the Easter Islanders come from? Since they are Polynesians in race, language, and culture, the problem of their origin coincides with that of the Polynesians as a whole and is as yet unsolved. That the Polynesians came from Asia is beyond doubt. India, Assam, and Indo-China have been variously given as the cradle of these seafaring tribes, but sufficient evidence to validate these theories is still lacking. Within the Polynesian world the Easter Islanders offer
[171] many analogies with the Maori of New Zealand, the people of Mangareva and those of the Marquesas. Actually the resemblances between Easter Island culture and that of the Marquesas are very striking. It

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is possible that the Easter Islanders were among the early Polynesian emigrants who spread from central Polynesia toward the east, occupying the Tuamotus, Mangareva, and the Marquesas. Very likely after a sojourn in the Marquesas some again sailed eastward and discovered Easter Island. At the time they left the Marquesas their culture, of course, had not yet developed the specific pattern which characterized it when the Europeans landed there in the eighteenth century.

The genealogies of Mangareva, the nearest Polynesian island to Easter Island, date back to the twelfth century, but traditional history mentions early immigrants who settled on these islands and then left for other countries, leading a restless life. Similar traditions exist among the Marquesans. Hotu-matua, the discoverer of Easter Island, and his followers may well have represented a defeated tribe or a junior branch of the Marquesas or Mangareva.

What remains today of their work is evidence of the beauty and greatness of their isolated civilization, revealing the vigor and audacity of these Polynesians who spread over what seem once to have been the happiest islands on earth.

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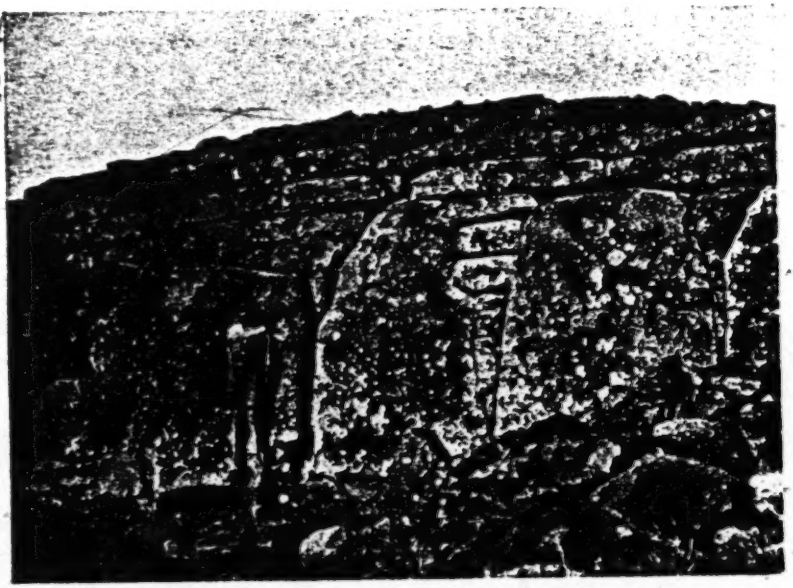
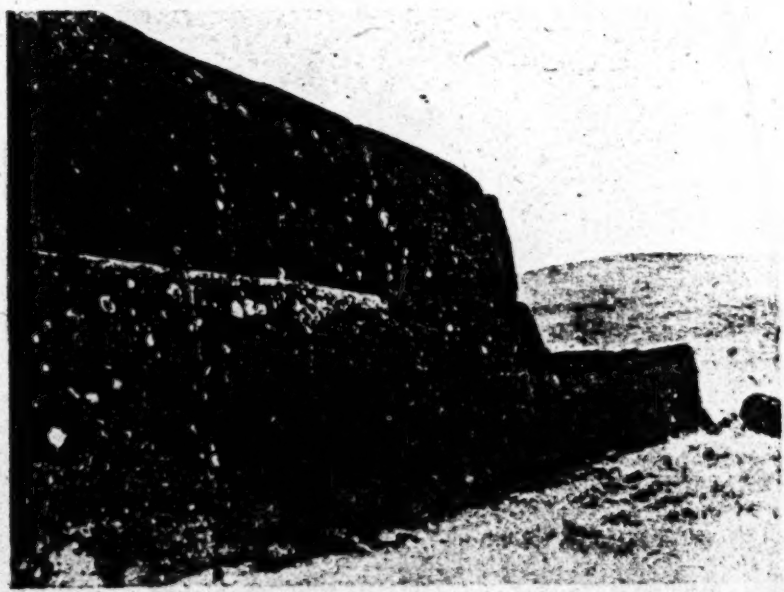


1. SEAWARD FACADE OF AHU (BURIAL PLATFORM) TE-PEU.
Notice in the structure pitted slabs taken from house foundations.



2. THE SEAWARD FACADE OF AHU VINAPU, THE BEST STONE STRUCTURE OF THE ISLAND.

[END PLATE 1]

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HALF-BURIED STATUES ALONG THE SLOPE OF VOLCANO RANO RARAKU.

(END PLATE 2)

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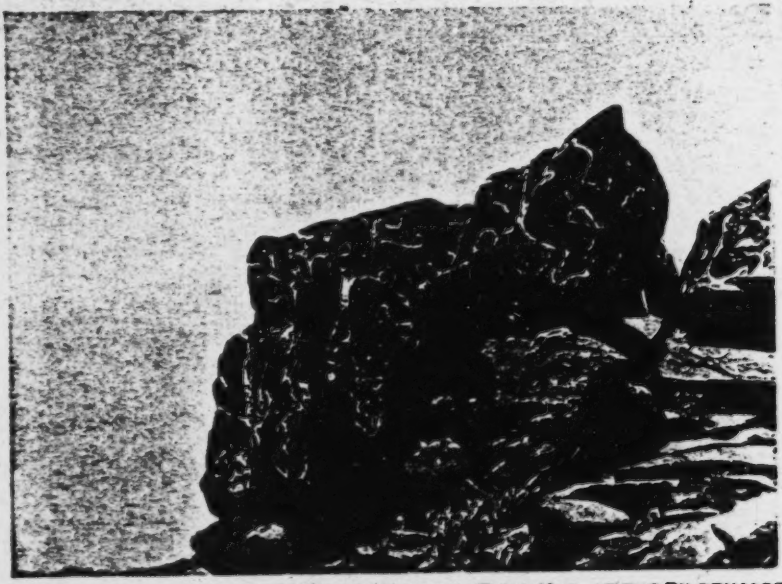

1. GROUP OF PETROGLYPHS ON TOP OF VOLCANO RANO-KAO, AT THE PILGRIMAGE SITE OF ORONGO.
They represent the bird-man holding the sacred egg.

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2. TEPANO, THE BEST INFORMANT OF THE ISLAND, CARVING A WOODEN IMAGE IN THE STYLE OF THE FAMOUS MOAI KAVAKAVA.
Modern specimens are crude as compared to the masterpieces of ancient art.

[END PLATE 3]

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1. VICTORIA RAPAHANGO, ONE OF THE LAST DESCENDANTS OF THE KINGLY FAMILY, PEELING PAPER MULBERRY STEM TO MAKE BARK CLOTH.

2. NATIVE GIRL BEATING PAPER MULBERRY BARK TO MAKE A FABRIC.

[END PLATE 4]